

The Congressman From the Land of Jazz

By Nat Hentoff

Since 1964, 75-year-old John Conyers—a long-serving Democrat in his 19th term, a founder of the Congressional Black Caucus and a leading critic of the USA Patriot Act—has represented the 14th Congressional District, which includes Detroit. His legislative record includes the passage of a 1987 resolution declaring “the sense of Congress that jazz is [a] rare and valuable American national treasure.”

In his office, Mr. Conyers told me recently that he often communicates with his “spiritual musical ancestors” by playing recordings in his office of John Coltrane, Miles Davis and Charlie Parker. He adds, “This really helps me in my work here.” When he’s asked about the pressure of that work, Mr. Conyers says, “It really isn’t that hard for me because I always have my music with me.”

Jazz has been an integral part of his life from the ninth grade, when he started playing cornet and became a regular visitor to Detroit’s Paradise Theater to be in the presence, over the years, of Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan and Dizzy Gillespie. While histories of jazz focus on such vital centers as New Orleans, Chicago, New York and the West Coast, Detroit has been a bountiful source of a long list of singular and influential masters of the music.

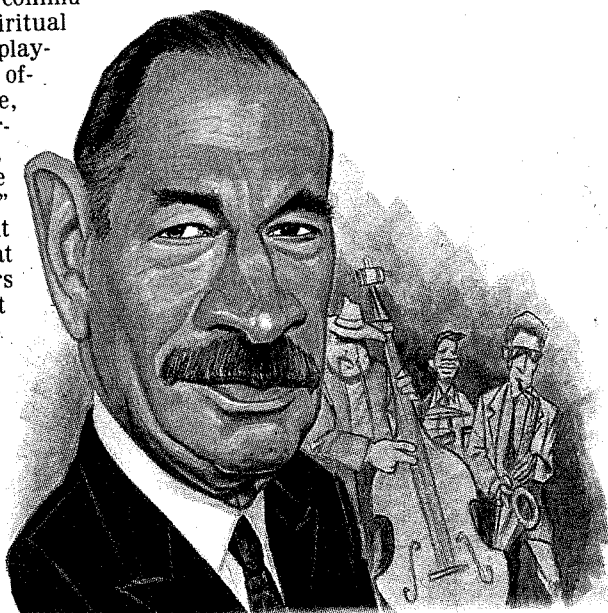
Fellow students at Northwestern High School were such subsequently renowned jazz figures as Betty Carter, later a startlingly inventive jazz singer; and the deeply swinging tenor saxophonist Billy Mitchell. At Cass Technical High School, the congressman told me, “there were bassist Paul Chambers, trumpet players Howard McGhee and Donald Byrd.” Also from Detroit, he enthusiastically added, were guitarist Kenny Burrell, vibraphonist Milt Jackson and the formidable Jones brothers—Elvin (drums), Hank (piano) and Thad (trumpet).

As a teenager, “putting my age up and deathly afraid of being found out,” Mr. Conyers frequented the city’s most significant jazz clubs—Baker’s Keyboard Lounge, the Blue Bird Inn, El Sino and the Frolic Show Bar. The challenge was

that, to act his alleged age, he had to order a beer—but he couldn’t drink it because it would make him sleepy. Still, it was in plain sight on his table.

While in high school, he heard a recording that, he says, “changed my whole cultural approach to music—Charlie Parker’s ‘Now’s the Time’ with Miles Davis, and Dizzy Gillespie playing piano. I became an instant bebopper. I’ve played that record at least 10,000 times.”

Having interrupted his glowing memories to go to the House floor for a vote,



the congressman returned to the phone interview with a story of a trip some 20 years ago to Ghana, where he attended a meeting of the Organization of African States: “There were about 50 women singing and shouting, and they had these huge conga drums. There was this

Fellow students at John Conyers’s Detroit high school included the jazz singer Betty Carter and the tenor saxophonist Billy Mitchell.

little guy with a horn, blowing a riff at everybody. I realized that this was the precise background music I’d heard in John Coltrane that I thought he had created. But I knew these Africans hadn’t heard Coltrane on any recording, so it was very clear who got what from whom. Coltrane had brought this over, creating this African song as part of his music. It was the same song! I thought, ‘Oh, God, this is tremendous!’ Like I said, jazz for me is like recontacting my spiritual ancestors.

“But,” he continued, “although this is an African-American created music, it’s available to everybody if you want to get it. I’ve always argued that white guys can learn to play jazz.” Citing baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams,

the congressman said, “He was the greatest on that instrument there ever was—and he came out of Detroit! There are African-Americans that can’t play jazz. But if you’ve got it, you can play it. You’re never too old. It’s never too late.”

After another interruption, Mr. Conyers came back excited: “Hey, guess what happened, Nat! I ran into Neil Abercrombie (D., Hawaii) in the hall. We’ve been working on getting an appropriation for a Billy Strayhorn Chair at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington.” (Pianist-composer Billy Strayhorn was Duke Ellington’s alter ego in the orchestra.)

“With Rodney Frelinghuysen of New Jersey, chair of the Appropriations Committee,” Mr. Conyers went on, “and Tom Davis of Virginia, the No. 2 Republican in the House, they’re going to write a line in the Appropriations Bill for the Billy Strayhorn Chair.” That legislative accomplishment didn’t make the news wires, but it made Rep. Conyers’s day.

I asked him if he still played the cornet. “You know what,” he said buoyantly, “I just told my sons this weekend before I left Detroit that I’m buying two cornets, two trumpets and a clarinet, and we’re going to all start playing again.” John is in junior high, and Carl is in elementary school.

While he was reminiscing again, about Detroit’s jazz clubs, the congressman noted that Baker’s Keyboard Lounge is still going strong. Indeed, a new release on the Warner Brothers Records label is saxophonist James Carter’s “Live at Baker’s Keyboard Lounge.” And the extensive definitive, illustrated history of Detroit jazz, “Before Motown,” by Lars Bjorn with Jim Gallert, is available from the University of Michigan Press in Ann Arbor. The introduction states: “Jazz historians have usually passed by Detroit when discussing the development of jazz.”

However, the congressman from the land of jazz remains one of its best informed chroniclers, and emphasizes: “There’s a lot of jazz still going on there. And there’s a lot more Congress can do for jazz once we’re over Iraq. There’ll come a time when we’ll be able to look back at our domestic program and get an effective national infrastructure to support, preserve and celebrate this national treasure.” The NEA Jazz Masters Program and the efforts of the Smithsonian are important. But the congressman believes more can be done to increase the audience for jazz in this nation.

Mr. Hentoff last wrote for the Journal about Quincy Jones.